



## Special Concerns of Older Adults in Disasters

### Reluctance to Evacuate

Research shows that older adults are less likely to heed warnings, may delay evacuations, or resist leaving their homes during disasters. Disaster planning and preparedness is especially critical with this group.

### Vulnerable Housing

Due to limited income, older adults tend to live in dwellings that are susceptible to disaster hazards due to the location and age of the buildings.

### Fear of Institutionalization

Many older adults fear that if their diminished physical or emotional capabilities are revealed, they will risk loss of independence or institutionalization. They may under-report the full extent of their problems and needs.

### Multiple Losses

An older person may have lost his or her income, job, home, loved ones, and/or physical capabilities prior to the disaster. For some, these prior losses may build coping strength and resilience. For others, these losses compound each other. Disasters sometimes provide a final blow that makes recovery especially difficult.

### Significance of Losses

As a result of disaster, irreplaceable possessions, such as photograph albums, mementos, valued items, or sacred objects passed on through generations may be destroyed. Pets or gardens developed over years may be lost. The special meaning of these losses must be recognized to assist with grieving.

### Sensory Deprivation

An older person's sense of smell, touch, vision, and hearing may be less acute than the general population. As a result, they may feel especially anxious about leaving familiar surroundings. They may not be able to hear what is said in a noisy environment or may be more apt to eat spoiled food.

### Chronic Health Conditions

Higher percentages of older people have chronic illnesses that may worsen with the stress of a disaster, particularly when recovery extends over months. Arthritis may prevent an older person from standing in line for long periods of time. Problems with thinking and memory may affect the person's ability to remember or process information.

### Medications

Older adults are more likely to be taking medications that need to be replaced quickly following a disaster. Medications may cause problems with confusion or memory, or cause a greater susceptibility to problems such as dehydration.

### **Hyper/Hypothermia Vulnerability**

Older persons are often more susceptible to the effects of heat and cold. This becomes critical in disasters when furnaces and air conditioning may be unavailable.

### **Transfer and Relocation Trauma**

Frail adults that are dislocated without use of proper procedures may suffer illness or even death. Relocation to unfamiliar surroundings and loss of community may result in depression and disorientation.

### **Delayed Response Syndromes**

Older people may not react as fast to a situation as a younger person may. In disasters, this may mean that deadlines for applications or eligibility timelines may need to be extended.

### **Mobility Impairment or Limitation**

Older persons may not be able to use automobiles or have access to public or private transportation. This may limit the opportunity to relocate, go to shelters, disaster recovery centers, or to obtain food, water, or medications when necessary.

### **Financial Limitations**

Because many older adults live on fixed and lower incomes, they can't take out a loan to fully repair their homes. They are unable to "start over" due to lack of money and time, as is more possible for younger people.

### **Literacy**

Older persons have lower educational levels than the general population. This may present difficulties with completion of applications or understanding directions. Public information targeting this group must be disseminated in multiple ways, including by non-written means.

### **Isolation**

Some older adults have limited social support systems and are not associated with local senior centers or churches. Their isolation may contribute to not learning about available resources. They may not have access to help with clean-up or repairs. Disaster outreach efforts should be prioritized in order to reach these individuals.

### **Crime Victimization**

Con artists target older people, particularly after a disaster. These issues need to be addressed in shelters, housing arrangements, and when contractors are being selected to repair homes.

### **Unfamiliar with Bureaucracy**

Older adults often have not had experience working through bureaucratic systems. This is especially true for those who had a spouse who dealt with these areas.

### **Welfare Stigma**

Many older persons will not use services that have the connotation of being welfare or a "hand out". They may need to be convinced that disaster services are available as a government service that their taxes have purchased.

### **Mental Health Stigma**

Older people may feel ashamed because they experience mental health problems or they may be unfamiliar with counseling as a form of support. Psychological stress may be manifested in physical symptoms which some find as more acceptable. Mental health services should emphasize "support", "talking" and "assistance with resources" and de-emphasize diagnosis or psychopathology.